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ABSTRACT

Failures and successes in teaching commercial foreign languages will speak for themselves. However, the profession must not foster exaggerated expectations of mastery in such a broad field, but must state honestly and realistically, with clear limits, what the commercial language course's goals are. In a college course enrolling somewhat experienced language students with little or no exposure to commercial foreign languages, the curriculum can be designed with objectives roughly analogous to those of a beginning undergraduate literature course: awareness of and respect for the field and familiarity with some of its important features. (MSE)

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SETTING REALISTIC OBJECTIVES FOR THE COMMERCIAL FOREIGN LANGUAGE COURSE

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Setting Realistic Objectives for the
Foreign Language Business Course

I would like to begin this talk with a few truisms, and so I ask your indulgence for this, I hope, momentary laps into triteness which, it seems to me is nonetheless the quickest way to establish the context for the issue to which I will speak.

Language is the universal, daily, almost constant experience of the human race. The use of language, any language, actively or passively involves certain skills. The extent to which these skills have been mastered by anyone involved in any of the forms of linguistic interaction is readily apparent to all. Clever people may hide their ignorance of geometry, biology, economics, history, or even current events by avoiding the deep waters of the substantive and maneuvering evasively around the shoreline of the superficial. We used to call this "shooting the bull" when I was in college. If you were good at it, there were some courses you could pass without having to study very much. If you were very good at it, you could even make a good grade without cracking a book. Such people were held in awe by their peers and usually could have their pick of elected office But try speaking a language when your knowledge of verb conjugations is incomplete, and your sentences are fractured. Try speaking a language when your knowledge of the vocabulary in the subject area is very limited, and your thoughts are hobbled. Trying to conceal linguistic skills insufficiently developed is like trying to conceal the fact that you had the linguini with garlic sauce just before the seminar. Sooner or later you are going to have to open your mouth, and then the truth will

out. We foreign language teachers are involved in a profession where the success or lack of success attending our efforts is either something we point to with pride or something that points back to us with shame, and whereas this is no less true for the other teaching disciplines, it is most obvious in the field of language learning.

All of us here who are professional language teachers know that the preceding remarks are true, and I warned you that they would be truisms. I offer them here today simply as a reminder that our failures as well as our successes in the commercial foreign language courses will, as always, speak for themselves. The general public will gather its impressions of and form its opinions about our profession's efforts in this new and important field of applied languages sooner that we think. There can be no doubting that our profession will be judged again, just as in the 1970's after the smoke of the post-sputnik, audio-lingual ballyhoo cleared away, and when it comes time for this judgment to be rendered, let us hope that we are judged fairly and that the standards against which our efforts are measured are realistic. If this is the case, I am sure that our profession will gain in stature both in the eyes of the general public and in the eyes of our colleagues in the other disciplines.

But in order for the public to be able to assess accurately the quality of our programs, we must be careful not to foster exaggerated expectations of mastery of a field as broad and deep as the one addressed only very partially and tentatively by the commercial foreign language course. Indeed, we must state honestly and realistically just what our goals are for the commercial foreign language course, taking care to point

out the clear limits that that define these goals. If we are not totally honest here, if we yield to the temptation to package our product in a box that looks as if it held twice its actual contents, we will not only be guilty of false advertising--which would certainly not set us apart in academe--we will also be contributing to the distortion of the very standards of achievement that will be used to measure our success down the road.

Those of us who began teaching in the 1960's or earlier remember the consistent theme of many who attacked and dismantled the foreign language distribution requirements at colleges across this nation. The criticism was that after two or three years of foreign language study, the majority of students still stumbled through a French sentence like illiterates. Of course that was true, and is still true, even after four or five years of French, given the realities of foreign language education in this country. But we should have been able to make the point that in their stumbling the students were moving ahead, they were at least stumbling in the right direction. But we could not make that point because the public expected so much more than just progress--they expected miracles. "Just give us the tools," we had promised, "and we'll do the job." The tools were expensive language labs and a modest increase in contact hours (usually an increase to a total of four or five hours per week from the original three). We promised more than we could not deliver, and like the victims of forclosure watching their dreams go up onto the auction block, we watched as our more successful neighbors in the social sciences and applied sciences carted away tenure track positions that had once been a part of our departments. We must not set ourselves up for another debacle on this

magnitude.

What sorts of objectives can we realistically set and honestly announce for undergraduate commercial foreign language courses? To speak to this question I have postulated an academic setting which is fairly typical for departments that have recently ventured into this new field. Let us say that the course has a prerequisite of at least four semesters of the target language at the college level but that the students have not had any previous commercial foreign language courses. This is, then not a beginning-level foreign language course, but it is an introduction to the subject area. The students in this course may or may not be foreign language majors or minors, and they may or may not be business majors or minors. Any student with the prerequisite four semesters and the interest may register. And finally, but no less significantly, the instructor and planner of this course is a member of the faculty in the foreign language department who has no formal education in the areas of business management and would never be hired by any of the departments in the business school under any circumstances.

To frame the objectives for this course I will draw an analogy to an undergraduate literature course. Since this course is an introductory commercial foreign language course, the assumption should be that the students are as new to the field as they would be to the study of German classical literature as undergraduates. And no one familiar with the field of German literature would expect an undergraduate course in the classical period to do any more than provide the students with an introduction, a "leg up," as it were, into the field. The objectives of a

course in the German classical period would be to make the students aware of the period through first-hand involvement with some of its representative works. The hope would be that the students would gain respect for an important cultural achievement and become familiar with some of its significant ideas and their expression in literature. These objectives would be realistic, given the time alloted (one semester) and the previous preparation of the students, and they would be considered realizable, perhaps even modest, but no less worthwhile for that, given the richness and scope of the field in question.

The professional humanist knows well enough how to go about planning the objectives of a genre or period course in literature, and we may, indeed ought to apply the same criteria in our planning of a commercial foreign language course. Such a course can, in all honesty, be no more than an introduction to the language and concepts informing an important dimension of contemporary culture, namely the world of commerce. Given the scope of this field, this is indeed a modest proposal, but it is also an honest and useful one and clearly analogous to the time-honored approach to humanistic studies. Moreover, planning a commercial foreign language course with this in mind goes a long way toward taking the edge off the uneasiness the instructor may feel when confronted by the newness and vastness of this subject matter. A course with appropriately modest objectives is easier to plan and to prepare for. And we are, after all, really launching our students, and ourselves as well, although we may not wish to publish the latter fact too widely, on a new adventure in learning. This latter fact is, of course, of tremendous significance to many of us, who are, in many cases single-handedly,

retraining ourselves to function as guides in an alien environment. But we are pioneers, map makers, charting a new area for our profession, not conquistadors on our way to the city of gold. As long as our goals are realistic and our objectives, practical we will be deserted neither by those who follow us along these new paths nor by those who underwrite the cost of the expedition because they will perceive us as succeeding in the attainment of the worthwhile goals we have set for ourselves.